

**DOUBLE ISSUE  
INCLUDES**

**SPECIAL INSERT: COMMUNITY WRITING**

# LACMF

## LITERACY ACROSS THE CURRICULUM MEDIA FOCUS

**Volume 14 • Issues 3 & 4**

**Connecting literacy, media and technology in the schools, community and workplace**

James Paul Gee infuriated many teachers in a packed lecture hall when he suggested, among other things, that, at the level of "social languages," words, phrases and sentences have no fixed meanings, but are "'customized,' built, or assembled ..here and now, 'on the fly,' 'on the spot,' 'on line,' when and as we speak/write or listen /read."<sup>1</sup> He claims that is part of what we need to make explicit to our students.

Gee, known for sociolinguistic work on literacy, was talking about teaching both children and adults, and drew special attention to those learners he calls "authentic beginners." In earlier papers, he has referred to them as "latecomers," --people who arrive at learning sites after some others have already had time to practice, making the latecomers appear "slow."



However, because "latecomer" can imply that it is the latecomers' fault that they have arrived late, Gee has changed the terminology; now he calls them "authentic beginners."

"Authentic beginners" are the children or adults who come to learning sites without the early preparation, pre-alignment of cultural values and sociocultural resources that more advantaged learners have. Children from some minority and lower class homes fit the description; so do many adult literacy students. Gee suggests that in schools, children who come prepared should be called "false beginners" because they already know so much of what is valued in schools, and teachers assume that they are the norm; less privileged children seem "slow."

Adults who came to learning without the expected knowledge are also seen as "slow." Too much of what they need to know is taken for granted and never made explicit. Gee challenges this:

*What I want to concentrate on here is not just the injustice of pretending that people are all together beginners when some are authentic beginners and some are false ones. I want to concentrate as well on just what it is that authentic beginners often don't know and need to know, if they are ever to "catch up" with false beginners, but which "insiders" often can't or won't tell them. Though I must admit as well that our whole idea of "catching up" is in serious need of interrogation itself. In many sites, especially in schools, we set the "norm" in terms of performance of the most advanced "false beginners" and then pretend that learners making quite "normal" and adequate progress by any rational standards, are not "really learning."*

One implication is that we should not be teaching language as a "thing" or set of grammatical rules, but as different forms of discourse with social and political game rules. Gee believes we need to make those differences explicit to our students, and help them understand the different meanings that language can have in different contexts. We also have to help them reflect on their own positions in relation to these different discourses. Otherwise, he suggests, we are doing them an injustice.

## INSIDE

TO PONDER.....3	Verbal & Visual Literacy: research summaries.....18
Learning Disabilities: NFB Video.....4	Concerning literacy and technology.....20
Health Literacy Centre.....5	Should IALS estimates be revised?.....21
Women and literacy: CCLOW.....6	REVIEWS: Contested grounds.....23
Women and literacy: Male perspective.....10	REVIEWS: Setting the compass.....25
IN THE CLASSROOM:	RESOURCES: Community writing.....26
Adults with learning disabilities.....12	CONFERENCES.....27
Media education/literacy education.....13	HAPPENING AT THE CENTRE.....29
<b>PULL-OUT INSERT</b>	AVAILABLE FROM THE CENTRE.....30
COMMUNITY WRITING	Summer Institute 2000.....32
Connecting literacy and the literary	

[Back to Newsletter Archive](#)

[Next](#)